RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

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Socio-economic Series 10-007

Affordable Housing for Families: Assessing the Outcomes

INTRODUCTION

A number of research studies[1] have demonstrated that there are positive impacts for families who move into social housing, including increased affordability[2], suitability and adequacy of housing. However, there have been fewer studies on non-shelter impacts of a move into social housing, although a small number examine impacts on health, educational performance and community involvement. There is a particular dearth of studies which compare families' situations "before and after" the move into social housing, and a lack of studies which explore the causal relationships or factors that contribute to post-move improvements in social and economic outcomes.

The *Affordable Housing for Families* study helps to address this gap by interviewing 85 household heads with children under 19 who have moved into social housing within the previous two years, and identifies changes that these families have experienced as a result of their move into social housing. This study explores the changes in shelter and non-shelter outcomes of low income families as a result of moving into social housing in Metro Vancouver and the Okanagan, along with the factors that contributed to these outcomes.

The objectives of this research were to:

1. Create a profile of families currently receiving placements in social housing in Greater Vancouver and the Okanagan.
2. Assess the appropriateness and affordability of social housing for the families.
3. Determine to what extent families view social housing as transitional or permanent housing.
4. Assess the social and economic outcomes for the families as a result of having moved into social housing.

METHODOLOGY

The three-part research strategy consisted of a literature review, interviews with housing providers and key informants, and interviews with families with children under 19, where the family had moved into social housing between July 2004 and June 2006.

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[1] Blunden, Hazel with Craig Johnston (2005). Public Housing and Nonhousing Outcomes. Shelter New South Whales; Phibbs, Peter with Peter Young (2005), Housing Assistance and Non-Shelter Outcomes. Final Report. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Sydney Research Centre.

[2] Tenants pay rent based on total household income (generally no more than 30% of total household income).

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Literature review

The literature review examined previous research on shelter and non-shelter outcomes for families moving into social housing in order to identify key outcomes and contributing factors which were explored in later phases of the study. It included Canadian and Australian publications and some coverage of United States and United Kingdom material. Attention focused on identifying non-shelter outcomes, and factors contributing to these outcomes.

Interviews with Housing Providers and Key Informants

Housing providers and other key stakeholders were interviewed in order to provide a broader context to the study. In particular, they were asked about how vacancies are filled, length of waiting lists, and causes of evictions, as well as their perspective of the benefits to families of social housing. They were also asked how social housing and its tenants have changed over the years. Interviews were conducted with 14 housing providers, two service providers and one academic whose research has focused on low-income families. These interviews were conducted to supplement information found during the literature review and contributed to the conceptual framework for the study and findings.

Interviews with heads of households in social housing

Interviews were completed with a total of 85 household heads, including 65 in Greater Vancouver and 20 in the Okanagan. Families eligible for the study needed to meet two criteria: they needed to have children under 19, and to have moved into social housing within the previous two years. In other respects, the household heads interviewed[3] represented a diversity of household composition, income, workforce participation, level of education and cultural background. The vast majority of interviewees never lived in social housing before. All interviews were conducted in person with the exception of two in the Okanagan which were completed by telephone. This time frame was selected so that participants could draw on their recent memories of their previous housing situation as a point of comparison for their experience of living in social housing[4]. Families with children were selected so that the impact of social housing on children could be explored.

The study questionnaires were developed to gather evidence to either support or refute the hypothesis that these outcomes (noted below) resulted from families moving into social housing. The questionnaires were pre-tested and revised prior to finalization.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Results of the Literature Review

The following outcomes were selected for this study because previous research had either identified them as resulting from, or positively correlated with, a move into social housing, or, in the case of changes in employment and experience of crime and safety, previous study results had been mixed.

Shelter Outcomes after moving into social housing:

- Lower housing costs / shelter affordability
- Better quality housing
- Adequate size of dwelling / reduction in crowding
- Increased security of tenure
- Better quality of maintenance
- Increased sense of control (e.g. not having to share accommodation)

[3] Ninety-one percent of the interviewees were women. The age of household heads, averaging 36 years, ranged from 21 to 57 years of age. Approximately two-thirds of the household heads were born in Canada. Thirteen percent of the household heads identified as First Nations or other Aboriginal people, and one-fifth of the household heads identified as members of a visible minority. The majority of households (three quarters) were led by a single adult, in most cases a woman.

[4] While many families had moved from market housing, four had previously been in transition housing, and two had been staying with friends at the time of their move. More than a third of household heads reported that they had been homeless at some point in their lives.

Non-Shelter Outcomes after moving into social housing:

- Improvement in physical health
- Improvement in mental health
- Reduction in stress/better mood
- Better diet
- More exercise
- Increased sense of belonging
- Increased involvement in the community
- Changes in employment
- Better school performance of children
- Children more motivated at school
- Improved access to services
- Better able to maintain or improve ties with family and friends
- Increased sense of safety and security / less neighbourhood crime

The literature also identified a number of factors contributing to these outcomes, including for example:

- Fewer changes in schools
- Less noise
- More privacy
- Better air quality, temperature control systems
- Less dampness or mould
- Better role models
- More social connections with neighbours

Results of Interviews with housing providers

Housing providers reported a significant shift in the types of tenants living in social housing in comparison to the tenants they were serving 20 years ago. In particular, they noticed more immigrant families and fewer single parent families, as well as more working families and families with relatively higher incomes but who are still in housing need due to high housing costs. Some housing providers are seeing larger families, and more tenants with behavioural challenges and mental health issues.

Housing providers also noted that households tended to stay longer in social housing, because of the lack of affordable market housing. The average family stay is about five years. Previous tenants had seen social housing as an interim solution, as a "step" towards market housing. Today, families are split on whether social housing would be their home for the long term or provide a transitional housing solution. Providers expressed the view that it is much harder for current social housing tenants to enter the housing market at the same pace as those in the past.

Results of Interviews with household heads

The majority of respondents identified significant positive improvements to their quality of life since moving into social housing, and most attributed the changes to their new housing circumstances. Although the sample size was relatively small, and not all households experienced positive outcomes from the move, the results of this study are consistent with previous research on this topic. Most households interviewed reported that a move into social housing meant positive housing outcomes for the family: the housing was more suitable, better maintained, and of better quality. The families experienced less financial stress, more privacy, less crowding, and more secure tenancy. A significant improvement for many families was that they finally had an adequate number of bedrooms, better kitchen facilities and more space.

The families also experienced positive non-shelter outcomes. They generally reported improved physical and mental health (e.g. due to reduced stress), improved education performance by the children, increased access (e.g. walkability) to services and amenities, and increased community involvement. Furthermore, households reported that many of the positive changes were directly linked to the change in housing circumstances.

Households also identified a range of other improvements to their lives which occurred after entering social housing. Most respondents were financially better off as a result of the reduced housing cost, and a few reported that they were able to pay down debt, and save for emergencies or retirement. As a result of improved finances and living conditions, respondents identified they were healthier, noting a more nutritious diet, increased exercise, reduced stress and better moods.

Additionally, a majority of respondents identified improved educational outcomes for their children, attributing the change to happier children, less stressed parents and the children having their own bedrooms. Several of the respondents were able to access educational or training opportunities as a result of their changed circumstances.

Most respondents identified a stronger sense of community in their new homes.

The most important change in the families' lives since their move was, for roughly a quarter of those interviewed, their better financial situation, the better quality housing for the family, and increased safety and security.

Consistent with previous studies, crime and employment outcomes were mixed. Some families experienced a reduction in crime, while others found higher levels of crime in their new neighbourhoods. While just under three-quarters reported that their new neighbourhood was an improvement over the old one, almost half said that crime levels and lack of safety were what they least liked about their new neighbourhood. While the level of employment remained relatively the same, some household heads took the opportunity of their improved financial situation to leave full-time or part-time employment to care for family or pursue their education.

Not all of the respondents identified a positive change in their lives since entering social housing. Additionally, external variables could affect the non-shelter outcomes of the respondents regardless of housing outcome. However, a strong majority of respondents identified significant positive improvements to their quality of life[5], and most attributed the changes to their new housing circumstances.

[5] For example, close to 90% of households reported that they were somewhat or very satisfied with their housing unit, about 80% were satisfied with the size, layout and location, and 70% were satisfied with the management, maintenance and safety. In addition, 61% reported a reduction in stress, 82% indicated they were "better able to cope", 46% reported improved diets because they could afford better food, and 48% reported improved school performance for their children.

CONCLUSION

This study confirmed previous research on housing and non-shelter impacts of affordable housing on families. Not only are most low-income families who have moved into social housing better off financially, the housing is more suitable, better maintained, and of better quality. The families experienced less financial stress, more privacy, less crowding, and more secure tenancy. Moreover, families reported additional non-shelter benefits, such as better nutrition and physical and mental health, and better access to services. The key findings include:

- Social housing provides several positive outcomes for tenant families over and above improvements in the household financial situation. For a majority of families in housing need, a move into social housing can have a positive impact on health, education and social well-being outcomes.
- Social housing units that are located in neighbourhoods with easy access to community amenities such as recreation, shopping and transit, facilitate more community involvement and more physical exercise for the families in these units, with resulting health benefits.
- The strength of neighbourhood influences on family outcomes indicates that the location of social housing is as crucial as the design and operation of the facility itself. Neighbourhoods that are more likely to produce positive outcomes for families have amenities close by, good transportation, and would generally be considered 'good' or 'safe' neighbourhoods.
- The benefits of suitable housing (adequate number of bedrooms) and increased privacy include a reduction in self-reported stress for families and improved reported school performance for children.

  A private bedroom not only provided the children with a quiet study area, but was also associated with a greater degree of independence on the child's part, better sleep at night, and a better mood in the family overall. As well, the adults had fewer financial worries and more time was available for parents to spend with their children (e.g. playing and/or supervising homework).

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study focused on families who had been in social housing for less than two years, and so could not explore longer-term impacts. Improvements in employment and incomes, in particular, might become evident over the longer term as stable housing, increased social connections, and completion of education results in better employment. This is an area that is worthy of further research. A longitudinal study that followed families entering social housing and monitored outcomes over time might identify more positive results for employment, and crime and safety.

The characteristics of the neighbourhood in which the social housing unit was located appeared to have significant impacts on the families interviewed for this study. Additional research designed to look specifically at neighbourhood factors might provide further evidence for the link between neighbourhood characteristics and positive outcomes for families.

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